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ABSTRACT

This document is the result of an Institute for Educational Leadership conference convened to brief Congressional staff on dropouts, dropout programs, and what information about dropouts merits consideration by policymakers. This report is intended to be a readable account of the dropout problem appropriate for the general public as well as for policymakers. An executive summary outlines the scope of the dropout problem and lists school-based initiatives that address the dropout problem. This report explores the issue of school dropouts and prevention, reviews the research, examines model programs, studies ways schools can develop links with job training programs, and considers other policy matters. Section 1 provides descriptive data about which students are likely to be at risk. Section 2 examines problems in collecting accurate data on dropouts. Section 3 considers the roles played by the student's in-school experience, family conditions, and work/economic factors in the student's decision to drop out. Section 4 discusses major demographic changes that may make the dropout issue a more significant problem in the future. Section 5 examines the connection between schooling and a dropout's decision to leave. Section 6 looks at successful programs in dropout prevention and dropout vocational guidance. Section 7 suggests policy ideas for federal, state, and local agencies, and for higher education. Lists of resource materials and conference speakers are appended. (NB)

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of school dropouts is a significant one for our society. Most often, it closes down options for the future—and does so with a finality and harshness that vulnerable young people may not be able to anticipate or do anything about. Unfortunately, our institutions do not treat 'dropping out' as "taking the wrong side of the road for a short period of time," but rather as a final choice. However, schools are beginning to confront and cope with the causes for youngsters dropping out—but it is not easy to intervene, and we often are too late in doing so. As we become more knowledgeable about those who leave school—their reasons and the impact on their lives—we will need to find new ways to help youngsters find their way back from that "wrong side of the road" and in as short a period of time as possible. As the IEL conference made clear, dropping out is not just an issue to be dealt with by the schools. It is a community problem that must be addressed by every facet of our society.

This document is the final product of an invitational conference hosted by the Institute for Educational Leadership, with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The conference was intended to brief congressional staff on what we know about students who drop-out, what we think we know about dropout programs that work, and what information about dropouts we think merits consideration by policymakers.

The report was written by Sheppard Ranbom (then a reporter for *Education Week*) with final editing by Anne Lewis, Executive Editor, *Education USA*, and is intended to be a readable account of the dropout problem. It is appropriate for general public consumption, as well as for use by policymakers.

Although some material has been added to the conference discussions, this document is not a comprehensive analysis of the complex issue of school dropouts. We have tried to include references and resource information for those who want to pursue particular points in more depth.

This report owes much to the many people who read it, commented on it, and participated in the original conference. In particular, IEL thanks project manager Barbara McCloud; writer Sheppard Ranbom; editor, Anne Lewis; and overall editor, Lisa Walker. And, without the contributions of Carnegie Corporation of New York and Project Associate Diane August, the conference and this document would not have been possible. We especially appreciate Diane's guidance and assistance in bringing research and practice to bear on the policy community on such a significant issue.

—Michael D. Usdan, President
Institute for Educational Leadership

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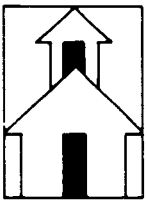


Executive Summary

"Nobody can wash his hands and watch the statistics grow . . . the students will be educated in the school or on the street. Unless schools reclaim those they lose, cities and communities will bear a heavy burden."

In Japan, where all but 7% of students complete high school, dropouts are given specific help immediately after leaving school so they can become productive members of the work force.

In West Germany, dropouts fit into an apprenticeship system that provides positive work experience and leads to certification as skilled labor.

In the United States, dropouts fill the welfare rolls and jails; they wander city streets; they cost society billions of dollars in social services funds, vandalism and crime, wasted human resources, and lost tax revenues.

Dropouts are the "at-risk" children who never complete high school and do not gain either the social or academic skills necessary to function well in this society as workers, parents, or citizens.

As noted in a recent report of the Education Commission of the States, every year some 700,000 students drop out of school. Nationally, one in four students do not graduate. In inner cities, the average is twice as high—about one in every two students fails to complete high school. For Native American and some Hispanic students, the dropout rate is still higher. About 85 percent of urban Native Americans and 70 to 80 percent of Puerto Ricans drop out of school, according to one study.

The costs of dropping out of school are staggering. According to research conducted by Henry Levin at Stanford University, the cost of high school dropouts, ages 25-34, conservatively amounts to $77 billion every year: $71 billion in lost tax revenues; $3 billion for welfare and unemployment; $3 billion for crime prevention.

Students drop out largely because of school-related problems, although stressful home situations and economic necessities may play a part. Other factors, such as the continued destabilization of the American family, a significant increase in the minority youth population, more limited federal spending for domestic programs, and increasing immigration, could result in substantial increases in the number of dropouts unless we begin to reverse the trend now.

The demographics of the school dropout problem also are changing dramatically, making its implications more serious than ever before. A society with a booming youth population and an expanding economy may well choose to let some of its youth fall by the wayside. But our society is aging rapidly, and is being tested economically in a more competitive world marketplace. The result is that the United States is becoming more dependent economically on a smaller, and more largely disadvantaged and minority, youth population. In 1950, seventeen workers paid the social security benefits of each retiree. By 1992, only three workers will provide the funds for each retiree, and one of the three workers will be minority, as reported by Harold Hodgkinson in *All One System*. Such a society lets its youth population go to waste at its own peril.

Indeed, the problem of school dropouts no longer is a matter of concern only to educators, advocates for youth, and the failing students and their families. Nor does it demand merely a charitable response from the altruistic. The problem affects everyone, and how the nation responds will help determine whether we create a permanent underclass or social cohesion, whether we will enjoy the fruits of our retirement or be destitute in our old age, and whether we will once again utilize our cities as places to live and work. Because the dropout problem is concentrated primarily in urban areas and in some rural pockets, it may be invisible to most of society. Unfortunately, it has been virtually overlooked in the nation's

current effort to reform the education system in the name of higher standards. Although upgraded standards can help raise expectations for students and encourage them to work harder and stay in school, new requirements for graduation and promotion adopted by most states may put more students in danger of dropping out.

Upgraded standards do not always take into account the wide diversity of students, and the standards come with little funding for remedial programs. Increasing the number of required courses, exerting rigid constraints on how time during the day must be used, and enhancing course content may require teachers to spend more time on adding units and less time on individualizing approaches to assist students who are falling behind. In addition, some suggest that requirements such as those stipulating that students must earn C-averages in academic courses in order to retain eligibility for sports and extracurricular activities may strip "at-risk" students of the few incentives that keep them in school. Most observers would agree that no student benefits in the long run by watered-down course requirements and a singular emphasis on nonacademic offerings. Still, there is concern that reforms may harm too many students on the edge and at risk unless they receive additional assistance.

While individual states pour millions of dollars into school reforms that promote "excellence," they continue to overlook "equity" matters that are particularly vital to helping potential dropouts continue in school. Urban areas have high poverty rates and weak tax bases, high incidences of juvenile crime and teen pregnancy, and a greater need for early intervention and remedial programs. Although there is no evidence that higher per-pupil expenditures or higher teacher salaries are linked to reduced dropout rates, a more equitable base of financial support for schools clearly would provide urban schools and those in rural pockets of poverty with funds for programs to cope with the myriad socialization problems and educational disadvantages students bring to school.

As urban tax bases continue to erode and districts must educate increasing numbers of disadvantaged students, the strain on administrators, teachers, and finances increases

to the point where, in the words of one superintendent, educators have to ask themselves "how can we best deal with the students who are in school, much less those who drop out?"

The problem of school dropouts is not created by schools alone, and we cannot expect them to solve it singlehandedly. But, educators can take greater responsibility for accurately monitoring the problem, remedying educational practices that push students out, hiring more minority teachers, financing dropout prevention programs, and collaborating with community agencies, the business community, and others who can help provide support to at-risk youngsters.

One of the most disturbing findings of a recent survey completed by Harold Hodgkinson for the Institute for Educational Leadership was that schools intervene too late in the course of a student's development. The common characteristics of a dropout-prone student—low socio-economic status, poor social and academic skills, low self esteem, a fatalistic outlook—may be visible as early as the third grade.

This report, in its concluding section, suggests policy ideas for federal, state and local agencies, and higher education.

Among school-based initiatives that help reduce the dropout problem are:

—**Developmental early childhood education programs** to give children from disadvantaged backgrounds a positive orientation to school, and skills training prior to beginning school.

—**Efforts to reduce school structures and teacher workloads** to give teachers opportunities for closer and effective contact with students and their parents.

—**Competency-based promotion** to identify verifiable skills, mastered at an individual pace with positive reinforcement from teachers, that can help offset negative school attitudes common among slow learners.

—**Summer programs** to ensure that disadvantaged students or slow learners do not lose educational gains made during the school year, and to give them supervised work experience.

—**Alternative high school programs** such as the "school within a school," to provide students with options.

—**Intensive, individualized training** in the basic skills combined with more relevant, concrete projects to provide a relationship to the world of work.

—**Experiential education** to link students to the broader community outside of schools, ranging from tutoring younger students to working on construction crews aimed at revitalizing urban housing, and to give students a greater sense of purpose, reorient them to the broader world outside of school, and establish a motivation to work and learn.

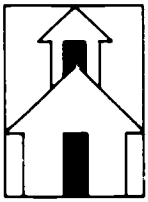
—**Bilingual education** to provide sufficient numbers of well-trained bilingual teachers who can work with the most at-risk pupils—speakers of English as a second language.

—**Collaboration** to bring government, higher education, business and industry, social service agencies, civic groups, and parents together to develop and expand programs for youth at risk of dropping out.

As Ramon Cortines, Superintendent of the San Jose (Calif.) Public Schools, stated during the IEL Conference: "[Nobody] can wash his hands and watch the statistics grow. There are not enough of them, and too many of us to be taken care of in our golden years. The students will be educated in school or on the street. Unless schools reclaim those they lose, cities and communities will bear a heavy burden."

These pages explore more closely the issue of school dropouts and prevention, review the research, examine model programs, study ways schools can develop closer links with job-training programs, and consider other policy matters.

This analysis is drawn from a conference sponsored by the Institute for Educational Leadership with funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Most of the statements and conclusions were drawn from conference participants, who are cited by section at the back of this text. However, additional research is cited as a supplement to the conference commentary.



Who Drops Out?

"By and large, dropouts are 'underachievers' who do not fit well academically into the school environment."

Every year, there are some 700,000 students beyond the 8th grade who drop out of school. Cumulatively, as many as 28 percent of the 17- and 18- year-old population across the country do not complete high school with their peers, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. These students have common characteristics. Most, but not all, come from low-income or poverty settings; have low basic academic skills, especially in reading and math; show limited aspirations and low self-esteem; and perceive that they have little control over their future.

According to the major longitudinal study of high school dropouts, the *High School and Beyond* survey which has tracked the academic progress of some 30,000 high school sophomores and 28,000 seniors from more than 1,000 high schools since 1980, students from the bottom quartile in measures of family socio-economic status are more than three times as likely to drop out as students of high socio-economic status. Moreover, students from low-income families are less likely to return to school or to get General Educational Development (G.E.D.) certificates than students from less impoverished backgrounds.

By and large, dropouts are 'underachievers' who do not fit well academically into the school environment. That dropouts do not perform to the level of academic achievement they are capable of is shown clearly by the *High School and Beyond* survey, which indicates that their tested achievement ranks 7 to 12 percentiles higher than their grades. (Dropouts' grades

average in the 16th percentile, although their tested achievement ranks in the 23rd-28th percentile.) In addition, they do less homework than students who stay in school. Repeated academic failures increase their sense of alienation as they progress through school. Some potential dropouts turn to drug abuse, and some seek other means of escape. In addition to the 700,000 students who drop out every year, another estimated 300,000 are perpetual truants.

Dropouts tend to have been retained in grade at least once during their school career, and are often older than their classmates. They generally have changed schools more often than other students, and lack a strong feeling of belonging to the school.

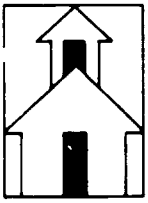
Other than Asian Americans, students from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be dropouts than are other students. Of these minority groups, Native Americans have the highest dropout rates: 48 percent, according to a study written by Samuel Peng for the Education Commission of the States. Some 45 percent of Hispanic students nationwide drop out of school, a rate that is more than double that of black students and nearly three times the dropout rate for white students.

Studies conducted in some urban high schools have revealed dropout rates as high as 85 percent for Native Americans, and between 70 and 80 percent for Puerto Ricans, according to a 1985 report by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students. A study recently conducted by the Hispanic Policy Development Project has documented that in New York City the dropout rate for Hispanics is about 80 percent. Chicago and Los Angeles, respectively, have 70- and 50-percent Hispanic dropout rates.

According to the *High School and Beyond* survey, states with the highest dropout rates tend to be in the Southeast. These states generally have higher minority populations, fewer English speakers, and younger and more concentrated populations. Overall, urban students are nearly twice as likely to drop out as suburban or rural students. In New York City, only 56 percent of 9th graders graduate; in Boston, 52 percent; Cleveland, 50 percent; Chicago, 44 percent; and Los Angeles, 44 percent.

States with the lowest dropout rates tend to be in the Midwest. These states have more rural, homogeneous and older populations, as well as smaller schools which are tied closely to community life.

These are descriptive data and tell us only which students are more likely to be at risk. Obviously, an examination of school characteristics, such as size, quality, resources, geographic location, or leadership, would provide a different focus on this problem. However, as reported in a recent study by the Education Commission of the States, the bottom line is clear: some 1.25 million whites, 750,000 blacks, and 305,000 Hispanics are at risk in our schools today.



The Definition of a Dropout

"The data collection issue is not only technical, but has political dimensions as well."

Data collection on the dropout problem is poor and not standardized. This situation makes it difficult for educators and policymakers to get a true picture of the scope and nature of the dropout problem nationally. The major difficulty is that state and federal government agencies collecting information on dropouts have no common definition of a "dropout."

The three major sources of national data on school dropouts are: the Census Bureau, state-by-state data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and the *High School and Beyond* study carried out by NCES. Because each uses different measures, the resulting statistics vary.

The Bureau of the Census, which collects information each October, defines dropouts as "persons who are not enrolled in school and who are not high school graduates (or the equivalent)." Such a definition is not always a useful gauge of the current dropout problem because data are usually reported for population subgroups beyond the high school attendance age. Another problem with the census data is that it is self-reported, and individuals may be reluctant to cite that family members are dropouts, or they may not even be aware of this fact.

The Education Department's "wall chart" is based on the state-generated Common Core of Data collected by the NCES, and uses a method of data validation that determines the percentage of students who complete high school during the same year as their original 9th-grade class. This method is the one most commonly used, and gives a national picture of

the dropout problem. But it cannot be used to make state-by-state comparisons because students may begin 9th grade in one school system and graduate from a school system in another state. At the conference, one speaker noted that under one measure of computation former Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell's home state of Utah ranked 7th on the wall chart. But under a different measure, Utah ranked 31st. Moreover, the measure overstates the national problem because those who earn equivalent degrees are still counted as dropouts. Another problem with the wall chart, observers say, is that states have no common reporting system, which makes the data subject to misinterpretation.

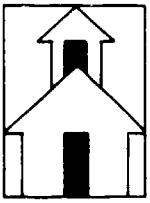
The third measure, the *High School and Beyond* study, tracks students after their sophomore year when many already have left school, and serves to underestimate the national dropout rate and problem.

Using these different definitions results in different estimates. The *High School and Beyond* study produces a 14 percent dropout rate; the Census Bureau sets the rate at 18 percent; and the NCES Common Core of Data says that 28 percent of students do not graduate. Recognizing the problem with the various collection methods, some researchers suggest 24 percent as a reasonable estimate of the national dropout rate.

The data collection issue is not only technical, but has political dimensions as well. Many districts collect information on dropouts in a manner that makes the problem appear less serious. For one thing, high dropout rates can be an embarrassment, and destroy public confidence in the quality of education in local schools. Thus, school districts sometimes provide a narrow definition of dropouts to understate the scope of the problem. Some districts separate students who leave school to join the Armed Forces or bear children from the dropout category. This manipulation reduces the dropout rate.

School administrators argue that it is difficult for districts to collect accurate information because of the transient nature of the school population. Students move out of a district frequently during the summer, and leave no information as

to where, or if, they will be attending school Collecting adequate data requires longitudinal study and exit interviews with students who are leaving the system and analysis of their reasons for leaving. Even so, the data collection problem has been one of clarity and consistency of definition and use of the same criteria. Comparable data would be useful in terms of framing the magnitude of the problem, over time and across school systems and states. Although accurate data are politically sensitive, such information could be one indicator of a district's academic health, and could be helpful to school administrators in evaluating programs and school-related factors which may be prompting students to leave.



Why Students Leave School

"For some students in some schools, dropping out is an act of heroism."

American youth drop out of high school for a variety of reasons which have changed very little over the past 20 years. Although they are often interrelated, and overlap, it is possible to group them into three major categories: students' in-school experiences, students' family conditions, and work/economic factors.

In-School Experiences

To at-risk students, school is often a hostile environment where they feel alienated and bored, and where they perceive themselves as chronic failures. (Drugs and a feeling of being lost in a crowded, impersonal environment are also factors that cause students to drop out.) By far, the most common reason for leaving high school is poor academic performance. Some 42 percent of the dropouts evaluated in the *High School and Beyond* study reported getting mostly D's in their classes, while 18 percent reported getting mostly C's, 8 percent B's, and 2 percent A's. About 36 percent of the males leaving school said they left because they had poor grades, while that reason was cited by 30 percent of the females. In other surveys of students who have dropped out of school, poor performance is often accompanied by expressed reasons for leaving such as, "I disliked school," or "school was not for me."

Bud Hodgkinson argues that schools have an "underlying agenda stressing silence, order, control, and competition." or modes of behavior that are often an anathema to at-risk students. Thus, rebellion against that agenda, marked by frequent expulsion, suspension, truancy, and in-school

delinquency, is one major reason why students, particularly males, drop out.

In the *High School and Beyond* study, some 21 percent of the males said they left school because they couldn't get along with teachers, and 13 percent said they were expelled or suspended. By contrast, only 10 percent of the females said they left because they couldn't get along with teachers, and 5 percent said they left because of expulsion or suspension. These descriptions reflect students' reactions and their performance. They say nothing of the lack of quality, effectiveness or meaning of the school program. As one school administrator put it: "For some students in some schools, dropping out is an act of heroism." Clearly, in some of our schools, a poor and boring school program does not meet the needs of students already struggling with other home and personal problems.

Family Conditions

Family conditions are a second set of factors associated with the failure to complete high school, the foremost of which is teenage pregnancy—a problem considered to have reached epidemic proportions in some large cities. According to Hodgkinson, every day 1,540 teenage girls give birth to a child; every day, some 40 teenage girls give birth to their *third* child.

Many students who drop out, and nearly one-third of the females, also report marital plans as the reason for leaving school. Also, one-fourth say they leave because of pregnancy. (There is some debate about whether students leave school because they are pregnant or become pregnant after they leave school.)

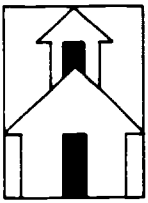
Another condition of the student's family which also contributes to the dropout problem is single-parent homes. Some studies have shown that students from single-parent families are twice as likely to drop out of school as are students living with both parents.

Work/Economic Factors

Economic issues constitute a third broad category of factors associated with dropping out of school.

Many students, particularly males, report leaving high school to go to work, which could involve supporting the family of origin or the youth's own family. Research suggests that very intensive work involvement is associated with higher rates of dropping out for at least some youth. Conversely, the *lack of jobs* in the inner city is cited as a reason why students drop out—almost 50 percent of minority and poor students. Some suggest that there is a correlation between high teenage pregnancy rates and high rates of unemployment for minority male youth. Further, students often know only of low-status, dead-end employment in urban areas and thus are not motivated to consider full-time employment as fulfilling and a high school diploma as worth the effort.

Some observers suggest that minority students drop out at high rates because their experience in poverty leads them to reject the widely held societal belief that greater education leads to employment and a guaranteed income. Further, some teenagers can make an enviable income through the unreported and illegal "street economy."



Demography: Impending Challenges

"Another indicator of more children at risk is that there is now a rapid increase in the number of poor households headed by black or Hispanic females. Ninety percent of the increase in children born into poverty comes from these households."

The changing demography of our nation makes school dropouts an increasingly expensive social and economic cost for all citizens. How well the nation responds to helping potential dropouts complete high school and make a transition to college and or work will not only empower them to build a better life for themselves and their children, but also improve the quality of life for all. And, in the most pragmatic sense, it will help the nation pay its retirement bills.

Among the major demographic changes that make the dropout issue a more significant problem in the future are:

1. **A rapidly expanding minority youth population and more children in poverty.**

According to Hodgkinson, low birth rates for whites (1.7 children per female) indicate that they will have a smaller population in the future, while Blacks (2.4 children per female) and Mexican Americans (2.9 children per female) will become a larger part of the population. Hodgkinson adds that the youthful age of the Hispanic and black populations, now averaging 22 and 25 years old respectively, will further raise birth rates, as women in these groups move into their peak childbearing years. In the meantime, women in the white population, now averaging 31 years of age, are moving out of their childbearing years.

Legal and illegal immigration will also bring more minorities into the United States than during the previous high point in the 1900s to 1920s. Legal immigration has more than doubled since 1950 to over 600,000 per year, and illegal immigration adds several hundred thousand more each year, as reported in a recent study by the Business Advisory Commission of the Education Commission of the States.

Population growth of minority groups will affect states in the Sunbelt more than those in the Frostbelt, but most states will feel some effect. California now has a "majority of minorities" in its elementary schools, while other states are rapidly approaching that point. All 25 of the largest city school systems in the country have predominately minority enrollments.

The fact that more minority students will be in school means that schools will have to deal with an increasingly diverse and disadvantaged student population. According to the Congressional Research Service, almost half of all black children and more than one-third of all Hispanic children were poor in 1983. In contrast, nearly five-sixths of all white children were not poor. Overall, a black child is almost three times as likely to be poor as a white child.

According to Hodgkinson: "Another indicator of more children at risk is that there is now a rapid increase in the number of poor households headed by a black or Hispanic female. Ninety percent of the increase in children born into poverty comes from these households."

2. A graying society.

The population between the ages of 15 to 24 will decline as a share of the total population from 23 percent in 1978 to 16 percent in 1995, shrinking by one-fourth the size of the entry labor pool.

In 1983, for the first time, there were more people over age 65 than there were teenagers. As the baby boom grows older, that condition will remain constant.

Where once 17 workers supported every retiree, only three workers will do so in the future. One of those three workers will be a minority.

Thus the dropout problem has a greater importance for society as a whole than ever before.

3. The continued destabilization of the traditional family. The family will undergo further changes that will place more students at risk of dropping out.

In 1955, 60 percent of households in the United States consisted of a working father, a housewife mother, and two or more school-age children. In 1980, that family unit was only 11 percent of our homes, and in 1985 it is 7 percent.

Of every 100 children born today:

—twelve will be born out of wedlock and 6 will be born to teenage mothers

—forty will be born to parents who divorce before the child is 18

—five will be born to parents who separate

—two will be born to parents of whom one will die before the child reaches 18

—forty-one will reach 18 "normally."

The U.S. Census reports that 59 percent of children born in 1983 will live with only one parent before reaching age 18.

In addition, according to the House Select Committee on Youth, Children and Families, more women will be in the workforce for economic reasons and for reasons of choice, meaning a potential increase in latchkey children who are known to have greater problems with schoolwork and who tend to grow isolated from the adult world. Currently, there are approximately 15 million latchkey children, ages 6-13.

The current epidemic of teenage pregnancies also will be a significant factor that may lead to more children at risk. Babies born to teen mothers are more likely to be premature and of low birth weight. Low birth weight is a major cause of developmental disorders that increase the problems children have in school and, thus, the potential of dropping out.

4. The labor market.

Leaving school prior to graduation generally has been considered harmful by our society. We have perceived education

as a key to better careers and higher earnings. Indeed, education may be the most important route to success in the labor market, which means that dropouts are less often employed than other workers and earn less money. They are more likely to require public assistance and to commit crimes.

Information from the Bureau of the Census and the Department of Justice corroborates these social costs:

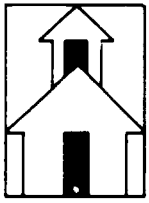
- In 1981, 36 percent of high school dropouts were unemployed compared with 21 percent of high school graduates not enrolled in college.
- In 1982, men and women 25 years of age and older who did not complete high school earned about one-third less than those who graduated.
- In 1978, the majority of inmates in local jails lacked a high school diploma—about 59 percent of white inmates and 63 percent of black inmates.

While many may leave school assuming they can begin employment, the job market provides limited opportunities for teenagers, particularly teenagers who are school dropouts. Higher entry-level skill needs may intensify this problem in the future, even in a service economy.

Youth unemployment has become steadily a more intransigent problem over the past 20 years. In the mid-1950s, the unemployment rate for all 16-to 19-year-olds was about 11 percent; in the early 1960s, the rate had risen to 16 percent, and it was continuing to climb. Economic growth and a greatly expanded federal effort in youth programming halted this increase in the late 1970s, but by 1982 the unemployment rate reverted to its long-term trend, reaching a peak of 24.5 percent. Furthermore, these rates do not apply evenly to all groups. More recent rates (December 1984), show unemployment at 18.8 percent for 16-to 19-year-olds; for black teenagers, it was over 41 percent.

According to the *High School and Beyond* study, less than two-thirds of males and one-third of females who left school as sophomores in 1980 actually worked full or part time. The study indicated that only 14 percent of males and 3 percent of females did skilled trade work. Most of the jobs were as

waiters and waitresses, clerks, factory workers, farm workers, gas station attendants, and the like. Within two years of dropping out, 51 percent of the males and 55 percent of the females reported they felt leaving school was not a good decision.



Dropouts and Schools

"The fear of many educators who deal with at-risk students is that these new demands for competency are like asking a high jumper who cannot cro.s a four-foot bar to jump a six-foot bar instead."

In 1900, only 1 in 10 teenage Americans enrolled in high school. By 1978, two-thirds of adults over 24 had completed four years of high school.

The dropout rate for males in 1900 was 90 percent and dropped to 80 percent by the 1920s. The dropout rate for all students was lowered from 50 percent in the 1950s to 18 percent in the mid 1970s. According to Hodgkinson, this is the lowest dropout rate in our history.

Today, however, with an aging population, an expanding minority enrollment, an influx of immigrants from nations all over the world, and a changing economy that eliminates many well-paying jobs for those without a diploma, a dropout rate of 18 to 24 percent--and much higher in urban centers and other areas—raises serious problems which schools must address.

While some efforts have been made to address the problem of high dropout rates, by and large they have not been integrated into the routine operations of schools or state policy, and have made no significant improvement in the problem nationwide.

Common Practices, Fundamental Problems

Important studies of school reform released in the past few years, most notably Ted Sizer's *Horace's Compromise* and

John Goodlad's *A Place Called School*, have indicated that policymakers and educators must change the structure and practices of schools in order to hold the interest of at-risk students and encourage them to stay in school. Large class and school size, tracking, misuse of standardized tests, rigidity of school curricula, emphasis on seat time versus competencies acquired, and insensitivity and lack of support for students from racial and linguistic backgrounds not of the mainstream culture are among the factors that help push at-risk students out of school.

1. School and class size. Large schools and classes lead students to feel anonymous, unimportant, and disassociated with the activities and goals of school. In large schools, teachers do not know students by name and can offer little individualized instruction to remediate learning problems. Moreover, there is little opportunity for students to take leadership responsibilities and participate significantly in extracurricular activities.

Small schools of 300 to 400 students with a low student-adult ratio have fewer disorders, higher achievement levels, higher rates of student participation, and stronger feelings of satisfaction with school life. Their ability to "engage" students often can be replicated in larger schools through special programs and counseling.

Said one observer: "With 35 kids in a class, it is easy to tell who is at risk but much more difficult to get at them."

2. Tracking. The way schools track students has a profound effect on student motivation and achievement. John Goodlad has pointed out that over the course of a year, it is not uncommon for students tracked in the most advanced learning group to progress five times faster than students in the least advanced group. Students placed in slower groups not only advance more slowly, but develop problems of lower self-esteem, misconduct, and higher delinquency and dropout rates. By contrast, when students are placed in classes of mixed ability and achievement they seem to be exposed to more effective instructional practices, and they like their experiences more than students in lower tracks.

In addition, another factor needs to be considered. According to the *High School and Beyond* study, students in the general or vocational tracks are three to four times more likely to drop out than students in an academic track.

3. Misuse of standardized tests. The use of norm-referenced tests to determine competence for promotion and graduation can force at-risk students out of school. If implemented without adequate support for remedial programs, they may serve as screening devices, reinforce students' problems of poor self-esteem, and mark off "achievers" and "failures" without identifying where students need help and determining the best approach for providing it.

4. Higher requirements without remediation or support for low achieving students. Increasingly, schools are reversing efforts of the late 1960s and early 1970s that broadened course offerings to meet the needs of individual students. Instead, they are imposing new requirements for more courses in a core of academic subjects. But some observers say that the movement back to a standard core limits the type of individualized curriculum and instructional approach crucial to students with substantial deficits in aptitude and achievement who have a sense of academic failure. Clearly, higher standards without additional assistance pose serious risks to students who are not doing well with the standard curriculum and whose school experiences are negative from the start.

5. Emphasis on seat time versus competency. According to Hodgkinson, the fact that schools base promotion on credits earned and "seat time" rather than mastery of required competencies limits the academic attainments of at-risk students. Because these students generally do not learn at the same pace as others, they react better to competency-based approaches that allow them to learn at an individual pace and receive positive reinforcement from teachers.

6. Lack of support for minorities. Cultural and linguistic minorities in urban areas have exposure to exceedingly few minority teachers who can serve as role models and advisers. Language minority students often suffer from attending schools that do not provide adequate bilingual education.

According to the report of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students, only about one-third of the estimated 2.7 million limited-English proficient students aged 5 to 14 receive any form of special help responsive to their linguistic need. Moreover, few Hispanic children with limited-English proficiency (only about 10 percent in 1981) are placed in bilingual programs. In 1980-81, nearly 25 percent of all public school teachers had students with limited-English proficiency in their classes, but only 3.2% had the academic preparation or language skills to instruct them.

The School Reform Movement

The current school reform movement has led to increased graduation standards in virtually every state. Although research on effective schools indicates that schools with high expectations encourage students to work harder and stay in school, the requirements which demand that all students adapt to more singular demands may increase the pressure to drop out. The increased standards imposed by states are designed to ensure that students undertake a tougher core curriculum with fewer electives, that there are stricter policies on attendance and the use of school time, that promotion be a direct result of adequate performance, and that students take achievement tests at major points of transition.

Figures gathered by *Education Week* indicate that between February 1983 and February 1985, 43 states raised their high school graduation requirements. Between February 1984 and February 1985, 15 states introduced exit tests for high school graduation and 37 states introduced statewide assessments, eight of which tied the assessments to "promotional gates." "The fear of many educators who deal with at-risk students is that these new demands for competency are like asking a high jumper who cannot cross a four-foot bar to jump a six-foot bar instead" said one conference participant. These demands to "jump higher" are made worse when the failure to do so closes down certain options, as in the case of most states which do not provide effective remedial programs or counseling for those who will need much more assistance. Only a few states—most notably South Carolina—have built in substantial remedial programs as an integral part of their reform efforts.

The criticisms and fears about the impact of the school reform efforts have focused attention on what works and does not work with school dropouts. Some observers are concerned that the movement to adopt a stronger academic core curriculum overemphasizes academic abilities and talents to the exclusion of others. They also are worried that a return to the "new basics" will subject students who are chronic failures to demands that afford them little chance of success.

The increase in required college preparatory courses drastically reduces the number of hours for studying what may be more appropriate for those students who are not college bound. Similarly, some educators expressed concern that statewide requirements that limit participation in extracurricular activities to students with at least C averages in academic courses will encourage ineligible students to drop out because they have lost one of their few incentives to stay in school.

Other concerns expressed by the conference participants about the impact of reform include:

—Experience shows that black and Hispanic students have disproportionately high failure rates on competency tests; thus, they will be put at an even greater disadvantage by new testing.

—The call for developing teachers who are "subject matter specialists" with more training in academic disciplines and less in pedagogy could hurt at-risk students who respond better to educators broadly educated to consider the "whole child."

—New requirements that stipulate the school day must be used only for academic programs create course scheduling problems for off-premises and work experience programs that benefit at-risk students; these students may not be able to meet obligations to family, jobs, and school.

Yet, these very points about "more appropriate vocational" courses and the loss of extracurricular activities is opposed by others who say that stressing vocational courses to the exclusion of academic attainment excuses schools from setting high standards and pushing "at-risk" students to do well. Many urban school superintendents have reacted this

way, saying that students at risk can do more, must be pushed to do more, and that letting at-risk students take an easy path is consigning them to a future of dependency. While it may be easy for the general public to agree with this approach because it does not affect them or their children, the solutions are more complex and will ultimately affect us all. This group would argue that continuing special programs, alternative programs and alternative schools are not the answer in the long run. More must be done in the early years to build students' confidence and establish a good early foundation for school and learning. Special programs, as research has shown, fragment the school and the curriculum and may limit options for particular groups of students.

Others argue that testing, when used appropriately, can provide schools and students with good measures of where they are and identify how to help them. Educators need to be concerned about the "whole child," but a school's main responsibility is the child's intellectual growth. The broader community must be engaged in the school debate and develop support for students who have family and financial obligations, or who have problems which inhibit their learning.

Finance

Before the cost of the education reform movement even entered the picture, American society was still trying to cope with an unfinished equity agenda. The related financial issues were traditional—per pupil expenditures, teachers' salaries, and differing abilities of communities to tax for education. Rural schools often have inadequate numbers of teachers and administrators, lack up-to-date instructional materials, and operate in substandard facilities; many are unable to provide adequate transition for their students from school-to-work because of limited opportunities in their communities—a factor that particularly inhibits career opportunities for females. Urban schools have high poverty rates, high incidences of juvenile crime and teenage pregnancy and a greater need for early intervention and remedial programs.

New York City, for example, educates almost one-half of the state's handicapped pupils, more than three-fourths of the students with limited-English proficiency, and one-half of the

students with basic educational needs. More than one-fourth of the City's children are supported by public assistance, one-third live in single-parent families, and well over one-half of the mothers of school-age children work. Minorities are the majority in the school-age population.

These circumstances are not considered in current education reform plans (with a few exceptions). The reform agenda focuses on "excellence," with more attention to such costs as teacher incentive pay plans, staff development, additional academic requirements and staff evaluation (the Texas competency test for teachers and administrators given in March 1986, for example, cost more than $4 million, not including what local school districts contributed in staff time and workshop fees for test preparation). Investing solely in "excellence" programs will detract from the unfinished equity agenda, at a time when the incidence of poverty-related problems for students and schools are increasing. We have yet to solve the problem of providing sufficient and flexible funding to both urban and rural school districts where resources are needed desperately. In addition, large urban districts that depended on federal funding to help with the problems created by desegregation lost millions of dollars in the early 1980s when that aid was folded into the Chapter 2 block grant.

Taking Responsibility

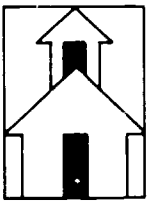
Research indicates that dropouts have a limited sense of control over their lives and future. They tend to look to others—parents, teachers, friends—to help make their decisions. In many ways, this may be a rational response to many of the problems around them. Similarly, schools often have dealt with dropouts in a like manner, yielding their responsibility to the many external forces which affect at-risk students: family problems, poverty, lack of motivation, and lack of adequate funding.

While it is too harsh to say that most schools have ignored students who drop out or who are at risk of dropping out, it would be hard to find an aggressive, system-wide anti-dropout strategy which has been in place for many years. At a time when schools, particularly urban schools, have been under fire and losing students to suburban and private schools,

there is a tendency to avoid talking about negative aspects of schooling and, instead, to draw attention to more positive aspects. Moreover, schools sometimes take the attitude that "if they don't want us, we don't want them," and do not provide incentives or programs to encourage dropouts to return to school.

We do know enough about why students drop out of school to help educators understand and deal with the connection between schooling and a student's decision to leave. The early signs include low test scores, particularly in reading; low grades; no feeling of competence in any subject; low attendance; and retention in a grade. The single best predictor of a potential dropout is that a student is held back before the eighth grade. Warning signs in high school include low grades, failed courses and low attendance. Other good predictors of potential dropouts are low academic self-concept, little sense of control over the academic environment, lack of "connectedness" with the school through extracurricular activities or a personal identification with a teacher or other adult, and lack of belief that the effort to graduate will be beneficial.

Educators at the conference said, "Like it or not, if the dropout problem is ever to be solved, schools must take a leadership role." Less than one percent of the youth in need of assistance is currently in programs such as those described in the next section. Schools are the only option. Schools have great resources at their disposal, are the institution that deals with the lifespan of youth, and exist in every community.



What Works?

"No single approach will work for all youth who drop out."

Programs for Students Still in School

Among the most successful methods of dealing with at-risk students are alternative education programs that place students in different environments, sometimes within their regular schools.

According to Gary Wehlage of the University of Wisconsin/Madison, an analysis of successful alternative programs indicates that all have the following characteristics:

1. **Small size**. The programs serve between 25 to 60 students and employ two to six faculty.

2. **Program autonomy**. Each program has its own name, space and facilities, and is operated by a small group of teachers who are given authority and responsibility to deal with problems in their own way.

3. **A committed teaching force**. There is optimism that even those who have failed and become hostile can be turned around. Teachers have high expectations for students and are professionally accountable for their success. They take on extended roles of teacher, counselor, parent, and advocate and deal with problems of the whole student, including those at home. They work well with each other.

4. **Nontraditional curricula**. An individualized approach in subjects like math and writing is essential. Cooperative learning components reinforce interdependence. Students start at their own level. Teachers use "real-life" examples and problems wherever possible.

5. Experiential education. Students are encouraged to participate in programs that link them to the external community, such as working in day care centers and nursing homes, tutoring younger students, or working on construction crews to revitalize urban housing. These experiences give students a greater sense of purpose, orient them to the broader world outside of school, and give them a motivation to work and learn.

6. Positive atmosphere and supportive peer culture. There is a "family atmosphere" among students. They are supportive of each other and work out problems together. Students learn that rules are in their own interest.

Although Wehlage's criteria are derived from programs operating only in Wisconsin, other research on alternative programs in a variety of settings supports his conclusions.

Research conducted by Eileen Foley and Susan B. McConnaughy with 300 students at eight alternative high schools in New York City indicates that the alternative programs were effective in raising credits earned by students by 60 percent and in cutting absences by 40 percent. While these programs have not had a wide impact on reducing the city's **overall** dropout rate, they do provide a direction for the future. Over the past two years, the state and city collectively have spent $55 million to address the problem. (New York City has an assistant superintendent specifically for dropout prevention.)

A prototypical example of an alternative educational program with considerable potential for preventing school delinquency and dropouts is *Project PATHE*, operated in seven secondary schools in Charleston, S.C., between 1980 and 1983.

Designed to prove the efficacy of school organizational change and individualized treatment, *Project PATHE* attempted to create a system for shared decision-making among community agencies, students, teachers, administrators, and parents in managing the schools while carrying out an intensive program of academic and counseling services for students at risk. The shared governance worked. However, the direct-service phase had only uneven success. It was marginally

effective for younger students who did receive stronger services, and ineffective for older, high school-age participants.

There is other evidence, however, that the individualized service approach has potential at the secondary-school level. The *Washington-Dix Street Academy* in Washington, D.C. is a model alternative program for dropouts and underachievers. Established in 1972 by the Washington Urban League, as part of a national project, it was phased completely into the D.C. public school system in 1975. The program is patterned after the "street academies" which sprang up in New York City in the 1960s. These were small, informal schools for dropouts and alienated youth established in church basements and storefronts near busy streets. They were partially staffed by young "street workers" from the community, who recruited, counseled, and tutored students. Because of budget cuts, the D.C. schools' program exists now without the aid of "street workers." Enrollment is voluntary. The program, which graduates about 35 students per year, provides individualized instruction in small classes where teachers have a close relationship with students. The Academy also gives students the opportunity to gain credit through community service in hospitals, day care centers, recreation centers, and government agencies. About two-thirds of the students in the program are young women, nearly half of whom are mothers.

Other school-based model programs aimed at students still in school include:

—*The Summer Training and Education Program*, a three-year demonstration project, launched by The Corporation for Public-Private Ventures of Philadelphia with support from the Ford Foundation. It gives 1,500 14-year-olds who failed a grade or read below grade level a chance to catch up with academic work during the summer months while earning money in a summer job and learning about family planning.

The project is targeted at young teens as they are about to make the difficult transition from junior to senior high school. The program is designed to improve literacy in reading and mathematics, increase high school completion rates, and reduce teenage pregnancy. The project has four key compo-

nents: remediation through self-paced, competency-based instruction; a life-planning program, with information on sex education and pregnancy and their effect on employment, summer jobs in maintenance, clerical, food service and recreational work; and in-school follow-up to monitor students and the success of the program in meeting its goals.

—*A Youth Tutoring Project* in San Antonio, Texas provides Hispanic students who need money to assist their families with eight hours of employment a week. Their job—to help third graders with their school work. The program has led to a reduction in absenteeism, improved scores on basic skills tests, and improved self-concept of students involved.

—*The Postsecondary Planning Program* in Dade County, Florida is a curriculum and counseling program that familiarizes students with careers. It uses computer labs and in-class activities, including mock employment situations and career exploration study projects, to give students motivation for learning. It begins in elementary school. Before the program was introduced in 1980, the dropout rate in Dade County averaged 20.4 percent. After the first year of operation, the dropout rate declined to 17.6 percent and in 1982-83 the rate was 15 percent. According to program personnel, not only have dropout rates declined, but job placement rates have increased significantly.

—Atlanta's *Adopt-A-Student Program* uses volunteers from the city's Merit Employment Association, a group of 40 local businesses, to provide students in the lowest quartile of their high school class with a role model on a one-to-one basis. The program includes seminars and workshops to aid high school students in developing and improving their job awareness, job preparation, and job aspirations, as well as life-coping skills.

—*Los Angeles Unified School District Dropout Recovery Prevention Program*, funded at $1 million, is now being piloted in 21 schools (divided evenly between high schools, junior high schools, and elementary schools). It provides additional staff members to work exclusively on identifying potential dropouts and providing them with counseling, tutoring, and

psychological help where appropriate. The staff also tries to locate students who already have dropped out and to encourage them to return.

—The *Cities in Schools Project's* primary characteristic is its basis in a local coalition of leadership involving the mayor's office, school system, business community and public and private social service agencies. This model promotes the increased effectiveness of service personnel and educators for at-risk students and families by placing public and private support services, including counseling, health, recreation, financial, legal and employment aid, in the schools. The program was first initiated in Atlanta and Indianapolis in 1974, but has been replicated in Houston, New York City, Bethlehem (Pa.), Los Angeles, the District of Columbia, and West Palm Beach.

—The *Center for Population and Family Health* has developed a comprehensive school-based health and support services program for disadvantaged junior high school students; pregnancy prevention is its major focus. The model develops a scenario for disadvantaged youth that reflects much of what more advantaged children have as a norm. The specific objectives of the program are to develop and implement comprehensive health services; develop and implement complementary support services; and design evaluation methodologies to monitor and assess program outcomes.

Programs for Out-of-School Youth

The nation's job-training system, a patchwork of public and privately sponsored programs aimed at improving the literacy and skill levels of youth so that they are ready to enter the world of work, plays an important role in helping students who have already left school find their way to productive employment.

For one thing, students who leave school often do not feel comfortable about getting involved in a program operated by schools, observers note.

Programs that are sponsored by districts that provide both the incentive of a job and school-based remediation do not meet the overwhelming needs of dropouts, who often are

independent, have themselves and families to support, and need more hours of work and training than the programs can provide.

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) has managed and studied six national demonstrations to improve the employability of a variety of people in over 60 sites across the country. These demonstrations have included Supported Work, Supported Work Youth Variation, Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects (YIEPP), Comprehensive Opportunities Project (COP), Project Redirection, and the Cleveland Work Incentive Program. MDRC's findings both help correct inaccurate assumptions and identify useful directions for model programs. The findings, cited below, are helpful as we try to identify fruitful policy directions for school dropouts.

1. **No single approach will work for all disadvantaged youth.** Because they are dealing with multiple problems at the same time, programs must be carefully designed and targeted. For example, moving seriously at-risk 17-to 20-year-old school dropouts immediately into a relatively short-term supported work program did not improve post-program behavior. Adding remediation and skills training to the work experience increased the effectiveness of the program. Further, individualizing the assessment and skill training focused on particular needs. Programs for pregnant teens and teenage mothers also need to have access to a wide range of services, including educational counseling and referral, employability training and job counseling, birth control education, referral to health services, instruction in parenting, personal counseling, life management education, recreational activities, and child care for those returning to school.

2. **Meaningful work experience can complement schooling for disadvantaged youth.** But, participants have to receive adequate basic education and employers have to establish school standards for youth to meet. Demonstrations conducted indicate that many issues need to be resolved in this area, including *defining and enforcing school attendance and performance standards*. Furthermore, schools were ineffective in recruiting students who had dropped out and did little to create curricula which met the needs of out of

school youth. *"Programs which provided academic credit for work experience did little to enhance students' basic skills and appeared to be of questionable value,"* the MDRC research says.

3. Dropouts prefer to return to alternative programs or other educational options such as GED programs. These findings also reinforce that schools or other educational institutions need to be able to provide options and support services.

4. The private sector has a role to play, although its participation in providing hiring programs was highly sensitive to size of subsidy at the beginning of involvement. Retail trades, new enterprises, and service industries were the most easily recruited participants.

The following summarizes the demonstrations studied by MDRC:

Supported Work provides a highly structured work experience program which gives individuals with severe employment problems a chance to work in a real job under conditions of graduated demands, close supervision and peer support. This program was *helpful to youth* but did not drastically change their post-program behavior.

Supported Work Youth Variation continues the *Supported Work* premise that work experience in a real job is important to future employment success and adds educational remediation and skills training, as well as other features closely tailored to the needs of youth dropouts.

The *Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Project* (YIEPP), the country's first guaranteed jobs program for low-income youth funded under the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, was available to all eligible youths in 17 demonstration areas from 1978 through 1981. The program linked work experience with school by requiring participants to be enrolled in school and to meet attendance and performance standards. Overall, 76,000 youths worked in jobs, many supported by the private sector. A final analysis of the program indicates that the entitlement's part-time, minimum-wage job offer did not prove sufficient to draw many dropouts back

into the school system or to keep them there once they returned. However, for the in-school youths who would have otherwise been unemployed, the job offer had the potential to enhance their future labor-market success.

The *Comprehensive Opportunities Project* (COP) was an outgrowth of YIEPP and attempted to develop an innovative, tightly structured curriculum designed around measurable standards. During 1980-82, COP identified and defined specific educational and employment competencies and laid out the necessary steps for youths to attain them.

Project Redirection aims at helping a group burdened by multiple disadvantages: pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers with poverty-level family incomes, almost half of whom are school dropouts. Begun in 1980 in five sites and recently expanded to seven more, the program guides each participant according to an individualized service plan and provides comprehensive services such as educational placement in regular public schools, alternative GED programs, on-site tutoring, employability development activities, placement in summer youth employment programs, and job search assistance. Beyond that, programs offer maternal and child health care; family planning; parenting skills; general life skills, such as balancing checkbooks and using want ads; help in child-care arrangements; peer group sessions; and counseling. Adult women from the community are volunteers who serve as role models and counselors.

Based on the findings of youth demonstrations, other model programs have been designed to take advantage of new knowledge. Two such model programs were discussed at the conference. *The Center for Employment Training* in San Jose, CA, helps 4,000 poor people per year gain basic skills through a combined work/learning program. Classes take place in an industrial-model classroom that stresses self-paced and task-oriented learning aimed at providing the skills needed to carry out the position in which they have been placed. Students work immediately toward a vocational objective in a heterogeneous group where they can see others with different learning problems succeed. Teaching is done in a team approach.

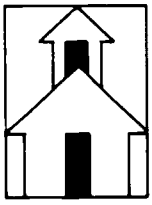
Remediation and Training Institute Program. In contrast to the combined work/learning program of the Center for Employment Training, this program stresses basic skills and provides job counseling at a later point. The institutes are neighborhood remediation and training programs for students of all ages and abilities—one-third of participants are dropouts, one-third are students in primary grades through high-school, and one-third are graduates needing to improve skills. The programs operate in public schools, in alternative schools, and in neighborhood centers and provide self-paced instruction in academic competencies and life skills, e.g. paying bills, balancing a checkbook. The program has a 90-day follow-up and an evaluation component which monitors a randomly selected 10 percent sample of past participants.

Another federal program, the *Job Corps*, has been highly successful in providing remedial skills instruction and training to approximately 78,000 disadvantaged youths between the ages of 18 and 21, most of whom are dropouts. Funded by the federal government at $600 million in fiscal 1985, the program provides an intensive residential education and work program that is almost military in structure. The residency program removes students from the community, reduces negative peer pressure, and helps keep problem students out of trouble.

Other resources can be helpful in planning a comprehensive community strategy to reduce the impact of dropping out. The federal *Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)*, funded at $3.6 billion, is the single largest federal program designed to help, through training and other services, economically disadvantaged individuals secure employment. Some 40 percent of the JTPA money must be spent on youth between the ages of 16 to 21. However, an independent evaluation of JTPA, by Grinker-Walker and Associates and MDRC, Inc., found that 80 percent of the JTPA sites were not meeting the legal requirement to spend 40 percent of their funds on youth, and only 10 percent had established specific programs targeted at youth.

The current Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, funded at $969 million, also provides vocational options for students, supporting cooperative education programs for non-

college bound students, among many initiatives for special needs students. About half a student's time in the cooperative programs must be spent in class and half on the job. Programs may include contracts among youth, school and employer; job-readiness training; matching of academic programs, aptitude, interest, and employment experience; networks of employers prepared to hire work/study graduates; and special services.



Policy Ideas

"First . . . begin with the conviction that helping at-risk youth is a major social priority, that action must be immediate and with a fervor that resembles a campaign."

In many crucial ways, at-risk or "disconnected" youth are connected to American society. Yet, they personally may be invisible to the vast majority of Americans who are "making it" and whose standard of living, on the surface, seems little affected by those youngsters who are not making it, or may not.

The demographics and economics of the problem of at-risk youth make it impossible to ignore the dependencies that exist—of the larger society on the productivity and well-being of those tempted to end their schooling, and of potential dropouts and those who already have left school, on the willingness and ability of the larger society to help them with problems largely out of their control.

This report has documented the social costs—to society and individuals—of those who drop out. It has analyzed the economic consequences in the future, when both the productivity (and competitive ability) of the country and the standard of living for the older population will depend greatly on the investment society makes in at-risk youth. It has provided data on who drops out and why. It has pointed out research that provides a basic understanding of the at-risk youth problem and programs that seem to be succeeding at solving the problem.

From all of these discussions, do there seem to be some general policies and strategies that should be considered by policymakers? The conference report suggests at least three.

A Campaign

First, for whatever reason—self-serving or altruistic—policymaking should begin with the conviction that helping at-risk youth is a major social priority, that action must be immediate and with a fervor that resembles a campaign. To delay—until the definitive study or a set of recommendations surfaces—condemns thousands of young people to an unproductive life and society to a costly expense from neglect. In school districts the size of Boston or San Francisco, one researcher has pointed out, students are leaving high schools at the rate of 20 a week. The time it takes for one more report or a series of meetings to explore the issue is time stolen, perhaps irretrievably, from young people's lives.

There is a strong role, in focusing national attention on the problem, for the "bully pulpit"--to both educate the public about the severity of the problem and to encourage young people to stay in school. Young people might listen more carefully if the message were tailored to what they want to hear—that society cares about their full participation, and not just their economic worth.

Further, the Advertising Council and other national groups, as well as public agencies, could be enlisted to create a "campaign" environment that would, at least, establish in the public's mind that this is an important matter to consider. A model exists. The Children's Defense Fund has enlisted the help of well-known advertising, public relations and media experts to develop a campaign against unwanted teenage pregnancies, with the initial target being adults who have influence over the decisions made by young people.

Data

Another general strategy would be to systematically collect the information necessary to evaluate the problem and solutions for it—at local, state and national levels. The priorities could be:

* To establish common definitions, at all levels of government, for those who drop out of school.

* To develop long-range plans for data collection so that information in the future will be comparable, consistent and useful for policy planning.

* To develop a more complete data base on the causes of the dropout problem, with enough specificity that policymakers, in any given community or state, will be able to look at the data and know that it is applicable. For example, at what grade level does the dropout problem emerge? What percentage of at-risk students are working part-time and how many hours? When did academic problems of the dropouts begin to show up in records?

* To determine what interventions work. Again, specificity would be important to policymaking. There are sub-groups of dropouts—those who leave for academic, economic or family reasons, or a combination. What interventions work with which subgroup? For how long? Major data gaps exist. For example, research presented at the conference indicated both that vocational programs help keep at-risk students in school and that the highest dropout rates are in vocational programs. Or, class size seems to be dismissed as a factor in causing dropouts, but there seems to be no definitive research on the impact of school size and structure on at-risk youth.

* To establish cost analyses of the dropout problem at all levels and of particular intervention strategies.

Coordination

"Someone" needs to be in charge of an all-out effort to reduce the number of school dropouts. Not only would specified leadership give the problem a high priority, but a locus of action is needed because young people drop out of school usually for a number of interacting reasons, not a single one, and it will take a coordinated effort to help them.

At federal, state and local levels, an agency, task force or other group, with authority to conduct research and bring diverse resources together, should be given responsibility for recommendations, financing, action and evaluation.

For example, some of the successful school-based health clinics demonstrate that co-mingling of federal, local education, foundation, and business funding can develop viable dropout prevention programs. Yet, their sponsors often have to work unnecessarily hard and "break rules" in order to obtain the flexibility needed. Building such cooperation and trust might require financial incentives.

In addition to these general strategies, the conference discussions and reviewers indicated efforts that different levels of policymaking could take.

Federal

When federal government programs focused specifically on the problems of dropouts, they provided limited data on successful models. Section 807 of Title VIII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act funded dropout prevention projects. Of the 10 originally funded, the U.S. Office of Education reported a 45 percent reduction in the number of dropouts over a three-year period. Their strategies included many now found in currently operated successful programs—alternative schools or learning centers, work-study programs, special academic programs, individualized instruction, strengthened guidance and counseling, community liaisons, teacher-student "buddy" systems and employment of parents of students who might drop out. This program was folded into the Chapter 2 block grant. It might be useful to now conduct follow-up research to determine how many projects still exist, how have they changed, their long-term success rate, etc.

Currently, there are school dropout-prevention measures before the House and Senate with two major themes—the collection of adequate, comparable data; and an emphasis on local design of dropout prevention programs.

Further action at the federal level might:

* Set the standards and provide the initiatives for data collection beyond just counting at-risk youth. A research priority should be on the components of successful—and unsuccessful—strategies to prevent dropouts and to encourage "drop-ins." The federal level could fund more sophisticated pilot projects that build on research already gathered, such as the use of an "education chit" with which a young person, 16 or older, could "purchase" the education environment that best suits him or her. Further, federal research should include studies on issues such as national trends in the awarding of General Educational Development Certificates, topics which states or communities are not well equipped to handle.

• Set the standards on making collaboration among agencies/programs feasible and flexible and provide incentives for those standards to be incorporated down the line. If interagency structures exist at the federal level to help at-risk youth—such as collaboration among labor, education, health and human services agencies—state and local levels would be encouraged to tailor their policies and activities toward collaboration.

• Study existing programs to see how they are targeted at at-risk youth and improve the targeting. This may involve legislative changes, for example, that would specify dropout prevention as a priority for Chapter 2 or target Chapter 1 funds at the grade levels where research indicates young people become at risk.

States

Some of the same priorities that should exist at the federal level also would be true of states—uniform data collection, agency coordination, selection of model policies/programs. However, there are some unique functions for state leadership:

• Establish a focus of leadership. This could be a state task force, an "every student will succeed" committee or some such group empowered to make dropout prevention a high priority and to evaluate efforts.

• Assess and adjust finance formulas to make sure, for equity purposes, that schools with high dropout rates have the resources they need.

• Provide incentives for interagency coordination that include economic development initiatives.

• Provide incentives to schools/school districts willing to address dropout prevention with research-based strategies geared toward long-term improvements (not "Bandaids"). Establish ways to recognize successful efforts.

• Assure that job training and higher education resources are included in both short-term and long-term strategies.

Local

In general, civic leadership—elected officials, business leaders, church leaders, and others within the power structure of local communities—could recognize the problem of at-risk youth and establish a coordinated effort, similar to a task force at the state level. Its role could include collecting data, informing the public, establishing priorities, seeking collaboration, and evaluating and reporting on progress.

Yet, the major player at the local level, as well as at the state and national levels, will be the education system and its leadership. While the best dropout prevention and re-entry programs should be tailored to community needs, resources and vision, there are components which research and experience indicate could be considered by local planners:

* Data collection. With computer technology, school districts can keep reliable, current information on student enrollments, dropouts, re-entries, enrollments in other programs (e.g. job training, private schools). Further, cumulative information on each student can be computerized. With commitment and organization, a school system can develop a data base that will not allow a student to "fall through the cracks."

* Staff training. Effective school research consistently points to the importance of high expectations for each child on the part of teachers. Further, the research and programs mentioned in this document refer to the important counseling role of teachers, administrators and other adults within the school. School districts could offer incentives (or provide mandates) to teachers to become better trained in working with at-risk youth and to improve their counseling skills. Also, these attributes could be taken into account when hiring staff for schools where increased numbers of at-risk youth are enrolled.

* Early childhood education. The schools could use their resources, or expand upon them, to focus on the developmental needs of young children, including adult education for the parents of young children. The schools could adopt the goal that every child experience success in the primary grades, through constant evaluation and immediate inter-

vention when necessary. Retention could be considered the "worst possible" solution. If junior/middle schools appear to be the level at which at-risk begins, resources for those grades could be increased.

* Expansion of in-school services. These could include such strategies as day care for infants of teenage mothers, extended day programs for working families, school-based health clinics for older students. While these may not seem to be "educational" functions, they meet needs which might inhibit students from participating fully in school. School-building leadership would need to accept this commitment and know how to develop collaborative relationships within the school community.

* Flexible in-school organization. Depending on research analyses and local resources, schools could examine their structures to see how they could be changed to meet the needs of at-risk youth. This could be, for example, schools-within-schools, night classes, or adult teams to work with at-risk youth.

* Alternative environments for students who need them. In some school districts there may be a permanent need for totally non-traditional school settings; in others, these could be a transition phase until schools are better able to offer early intervention and extensive counseling.

* Give every at-risk student a reason to stay in school, working from the premise that the educational resources should be used to help individual students broaden their options, no matter how much flexibility that requires. The staff should emphasize career expectations early, making sure that they are not stereotyped (for example, research shows that rural schools in poverty areas convey very low career expectations to female students). Schools could provide mentors—a "community of believers," as one participant suggested—to assure that every student has at least one adult advocate. Schools could become the broker for job training opportunities and higher education contacts, with appropriate recordkeeping and evaluation on each student.

* Institute avenues for easy, non-stigmatized re-entry of dropouts to school. Age and family responsibilities should be

considered in developing individualized education plans for these students.

* Follow-up. School personnel, at the building and central office level, should collect follow-up data on students who have dropped out or plan to, those who have re-entered and former at-risk students who have graduated. The emphasis should be on using the information to improve the school program.

Higher Education

As with business, the military and other sectors of society, higher education has a self-interest in making sure that all students reach their potential. The shrinking youth cohort also means a shrinking enrollment pool for higher education campuses. Further, colleges and universities already are concerned that minority enrollments have dropped, percentage-wise, from a peak in the late 1970s. This is especially true in graduate programs, which produce the role models which future generations need to encourage them.

Higher education institutions could have an impact on reducing the number of at-risk youth by:

* Improving teacher training programs so that future teachers and those returning for training have opportunities to learn how to deal with at-risk students, emphasizing effective teaching strategies, knowledge about intervention techniques, and counseling roles.

* Organizing interdisciplinary resources to help schools and their staffs work with at-risk students, such as designing staff development programs that incorporate resources from sociology, psychology and health fields.

* Developing counseling programs within schools with large at-risk student populations that could offer such services as college visits, summer programs and mentor relationships between faculty and students.

* Expanding the role of community/technical colleges in job training tied to remedial academic programs.

These strategies imply, as this section began, that reducing the at-risk student population is indeed "Everybody's Prob-

lem." It must be a high public priority and the responsibility of all those in a position to influence policy or implement programs. And that the business of schooling for at-risk youth cannot be conducted "as usual."

It is essential, commented Atlanta Superintendent Alonzo Crim, that everyone understand these students "perceive schooling differently and that such perceptions" affect them in different ways. Policymakers should accept that challenge.

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The Summer Training and Education Program. Contact: Michael A. Bailin, President, Public/Private Ventures, 399

Market Street, Third Floor, Philadelphia, PA 29206; 215/592-9099.

A Youth Tutoring Project. Contact: Blandina Ramirez, Director of Development, Intercultural Development Research Association, 5835 Callaghan Road, Suite 350, San Antonio, TX 78228; 512/684-8180.

The Post Secondary Planning Program. Contact: Judith Stein, Director of Career Education, Dade County Public Schools, 1450 NE Second Avenue, Miami, FL 32132; 305/376-1761.

Adopt-A-Student Program. Contact: Dr. Claude George, Special Consultant to the Superintendent, Atlanta Public Schools; 404/522-3174.

Los Angeles Unified School District Dropout Recovery Prevention Program. Contact: Peter Martinez, 450 N. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012; 213/625-6444.

Cities in Schools Project. Contact: 1110 Vermont Avenue, Suite 1120, Washington, D.C. 20005; 202/861-0230.

Center for Population and Family Health. Contact: Judith Jones, Assistant Director, 60 Haven Avenue, New York, New York 10032; 212/305-6072.

Programs for Out-of-School Youth

Youth Entitlement Pilot Project, Job Training Partnership Act, Job Corps. Contact: Office of the Assistant Secretary, Employment and Training Administration, 200 Constitution Avenue, Room S 2307, Washington, D.C. 20210; 202/523-6050.

The Center for Employment Training. Contact: Robert Johnston, Director of Planning and Evaluation, Center for Employment Training, 425 South Market Street, San Jose, CA 91526; 408/287-7924.

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IEL Conference Speakers:

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